

The Great Work: Healing the World by Collective Meditation

Roger Taylor PhD¹

We are living now in the age of Kali Yuga. According to Indo-Tibetan mythology, this is a time when iron birds fly in the air, and the life of the spirit falls to its nadir. The evidence for this can be seen all around us: alienation, crime, drugs, degradation of the environment and, poignantly, in a recent figure giving suicide as the third highest cause of death in children between the ages of five and seventeen in the US. Just recently I was particularly disturbed on learning that, according to two polls, some 40% of Americans believe in the literal truth of the Bible. This means that many of them regard attention to the accelerating deterioration of the environment as a waste of time because, according to apocalyptic prophecies in the Book of Revelation, the world is soon to end anyway. Likewise, they welcome wars with Islamic countries as a run-up to the final Battle of Armageddon, which will bring defeat of the anti-Christ, and return of the Messiah for the last judgement. At this time faithful Christians will be saved and go to heaven in rapture and the rest will be damned. Incredible as this belief seems, it has been promulgated in two best-selling books; moreover, over fifty percent of the US Congress members are backed by the religious right, and so can also be taken to share in it as well.

In this article I want first to briefly restate what has been much written about: how the scientific way of thinking arose, and has led us into this morass. I will then consider how, strangely enough, science itself seems to be pointing a way out. In support of this, I will outline three recent scientific studies, which could go a long way towards radically changing our world-view.

It is not hard to see how the age of Kali Yuga has arisen necessarily along with the predominant materialist world-view. Matthew Arnold wrote of the long withdrawing roar of the sea of faith. But the withdrawal has been under way much longer than perhaps he thought. For thousands of years animistic beliefs have been giving way to the developing monotheistic religions. All the spirits, which used to inhabit the natural world, have been, and are still being progressively withdrawn from it, and “kicked upstairs”, to be subsumed in one single Father God. In that he is now perceived as being separate from nature, this God has become more distant and less real than the spirits he replaced, and living nature has been debased to become merely a heap of dead matter out of which the raw materials for the human economy are to be mined.

To reinforce this view, over the last few centuries, the “church” of science has come to insist that, to be fully accepted, all truth should pass the test of measurement.

¹ email: rogerbt@onetel.com

Note however that, no matter what scales or instruments are employed, measurement always comes to our minds via the visual sense. Indeed human beings do rely on vision to the neglect of the other senses. Now, if we construct our world from visual data alone, we will necessarily perceive it to consist of solid material objects, all apparently separate from each other. It is thus that we get atomism, and the increasingly costly search for ultimate particles.

But quantum physics has forced us to consider an alternative view: of the world as waves or fields. It was initiated by the puzzling finding, among others, that what were thought to be subatomic particles also had wave-like properties, and what were thought to be waves (light) also had particle-like properties. It just depended on how you set up the experiment to detect them. This is just like using two types of sense organs: one, like the eyes, to see particles, and one, like the ears, to hear waves. So, just as the visible aspect of the world is completely different from the audible aspect of the same world; so the particle-detecting experiment is quite different from the wave-detecting experiment.

To obtain a feeling for the wave view it is a worthwhile exercise to imagine what kind of world you would construct if your only sense was hearing. Suppose we were beings who had no eyes, or any other senses excepting that of hearing. We would be aware, from the beginning, of a world of sound waves. It would consist only of tones (or frequencies) and loudness (or amplitude). There would be no solid objects – even though these would of course still exist for beings with eyes. Nevertheless, our sound world would still be quite rich, with all kinds of noises, pure tones, and chords, up to the most complex music. And of course voices, conveying informative signals of great complexity. Lets assume, too, that we only have one ear, placed in such a way that we could not tell which direction the sound came from. We would then grow up completely lacking in the concept of space – a concept so basic for our materialist world-view.

So, just as we are taught in the Heart Sutra, our world is a mental construct, depending on our particular evolution, genes, culture and language. Thus it is that, building a world on vision as we now do, only the material world of objects is taken as “really real”. And, because of this, I tend to take my material body to be the only real Me.

After some centuries of scientific revolution, this kind of belief has gone very deep. Growing up with this view, people now believe themselves to be separate from all other beings, and ultimately alone in the world. The existential anxiety this entails was well expressed by Rilke: “And if I should cry out, who, among the angelic hosts, would hear me?” In such a predicament, it makes sense to get as much of life’s material goodies, by whatever means possible, before one is annihilated. The very motives driving morality have been undergoing changes, which can only be seen as destructive. Natural morality arises out of the identification of the self with others, as can of course be seen in properly functional families. But although it can still be seen in some tribal peoples, natural morality in relation to the environment, arising out of identification with the natural world, has sunk, throughout most of our species, to a very low level. Increasingly it is being replaced by a morality imposed by authority: of parents, society, and ultimately the father God.

The impulse still exists, however, for re-connection with the spirit. There remain plenty of good-hearted people, who are aware of the spiritual decline, and want fervently to do something about it. Together with the moral degradation exhaustively presented to us by the media, like the white spot in the black side of the yin-yang symbol, there is thus an opposite trend, mostly served by them with disgraceful neglect. Never before have so many been aware and concerned about the sufferings of distant peoples. The phenomenal rise of the NGOs, and so many smaller philanthropic projects, and good-hearted people working in both the local and global arena towards a better world.

At the same time, over most of the world, churches, temples and mosques remain full. There is no lack of prayer. Within the materialist paradigm, however, the belief is that only activity in the “real” world can bear fruit. The belief that prayer is any good is weak; most people would be cautious about affirming that their prayers might bring results. Many also are meditating but, as with prayer, the way in which it is seen as worthwhile is interpreted through the clouded lenses of the materialist paradigm. Here, while not asking for anything in the outside world, we often carry the thought in our minds that meditation might “make us better people”, so that we may spread a good influence among others that we meet in the material world, and through them the influence may spread out in physical space like ripples in a pond. But there is no more real hope of any direct influence on the world outside than there is with prayer.

For all this to change, it seems, we need a radical change in our world-view. And this, I submit, may already be under way. For near on one hundred years now, quantum physics has been dissolving our solid world into one of ghostly insubstantial fields. Seemingly nihilistic from one point of view, the hope lies in the thought that, unlike solid objects, fields mingle and interpenetrate. They are intrinsically holistic. This much is readily understood from our common experience of fields such as magnetism and light, but a much harder concept is forcing its way onto the scientific scene: the concept of non-locality. The familiar fields, such as magnetism, are local, in the sense of being firmly rooted to a particular locality in space; and their influence needs to travel through space at the speed of light. But there is clear evidence now for a subtle interconnectedness, which behaves as if space did not exist. It has now been proved incontrovertibly that two particles can remain in instant communication whatever the distance between them.

Can the same be true for two human beings? While the thousands of anecdotes of telepathy would say yes, the objective evidence demanded by the church of science has been hard to obtain. Recently however, two very convincing lines of evidence have been presented. The first concerns brain waves. The technology now available for the study of the electroencephalogram, or EEG, enables one to quantify the degree to which two wave-trains are “in synch”; i.e. how much the wave-peaks coincide with each other. Working on this, at least three groups of scientists have shown first (and as expected) there is usually a high level of synchrony between the two halves of a single person’s brain. But what is new, and exciting, is the finding of synchrony between separate individuals. This occurs principally where there is a close relationship, as with lovers, or mother and child. But some beautiful results from a researcher in Italy have shown high degrees of synchrony between people meditating together. Because these meditators were in the same room, it might be

said that they were responding to the electromagnetic fields of each others' brains. But a German group has rejected this hypothesis by finding that synchrony still occurred between two individuals in distant rooms and screened inside Faraday cages.

Considerable synchrony may also occur between brain waves and other physiological rhythms, such as heart-beat and breathing. This becomes much more marked during meditation - as if this activity serves to harmonise bodily functions. In deep meditation also, the synchrony between left and right brains rises to very high levels. Although very much a preliminary study, unpublished in any scientific journal, it is worth mentioning the work of an electronic engineer, who looked for synchrony between peoples' brain waves and the "Schumann resonance": the natural electromagnetic resonance of the earth. He found this to occur, at times, particularly with "sensitives", such as psychics, healers and shamans.

The second line of evidence concerns a much more general phenomenon whereby the minds of millions of people all over the world can be seen to be linked together. This work began some 30 years ago, at Princeton University, with the finding that people could, with their minds, influence (albeit to a very small degree) the behaviour of a simple electronic device called a random event generator (REG). Unavoidably, all electronic components generate noise. This noise is generally thought to be completely random, but obviously a mental influence means a departure from randomness. Later experiments led the researchers to believe that conscious intention was not necessary, since the REG was responding to large groups of people who did not even know the device was in the room with them. Working with situations such as theatres or religious meetings, observers were sent in to record the times when there was simultaneous focus of emotion, such as when the audience laughed together, or held their breath at some dramatic scene. When later these records were compared with the record of noise from the REG, significant correlations were often found.

Thinking already that this effect might be non-local, they set up the Global Consciousness Project, whose objective was to look for correlations between REG behaviour and major world events which would be likely to focus the emotions of millions of people. The procedure now is, whenever a major world event takes place, to make a "formal prediction" that it will significantly affect the REGs. (There are now over 50 of these operating in various parts of the world). Then, whether the result is, or is not significant, it is still included in the calculation of overall significance.

These results are available for anyone to see on the inspiring website¹. A wide variety of events have been charted: eg the moment of new year (within local time zones of course), the Pope's visit to Jerusalem, a billion-person meditation, and especially some disasters such as the events of 9/11 (Fig.1).

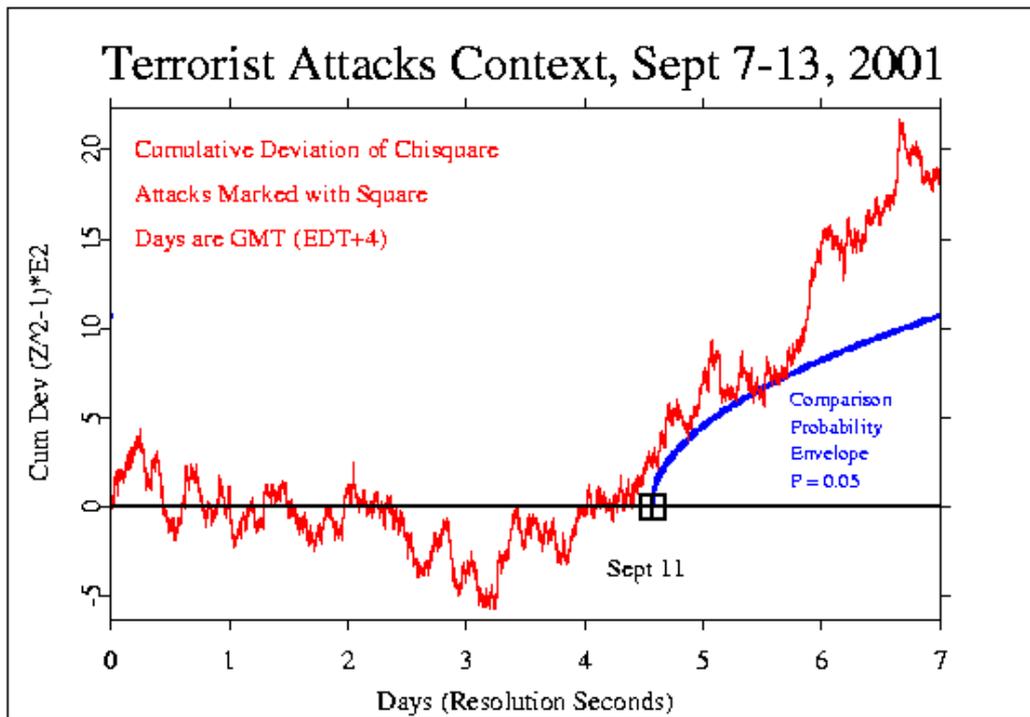


Fig.1

The combined statistical significance of all the results accumulated over several years is now extremely high. Have these subtle connections among human beings been increasing in recent years – perhaps with the help of the rapidly increasing network of communications by radio, telephone and the internet? It is too early to say. But the scientists running the Global Consciousness Project suggest that they have, and that they are leading us towards the “Omega Point,” as foreseen by Teilhard de Chardin, when the human race becomes in effect a single organism. In this case, it might be suggested, a high proportion of people’s brain waves would be in synch with the Schumann resonance much of the time, and lead them to identify with Gaia and the natural world.

These lines of work are only among the latest and most striking exemplars of a strand of thinking leading from ancient teachings to recent theoretical work by philosophers of science such as David Bohm. All lead to the conclusion that not only human beings, but everything in the universe, is connected at some deep level, and participates in one indivisible process of interdependent origination – just as the Buddha taught.

If this is so, then we already have the basis for belief that prayer might, after all, be effective. Indeed a number of scientific studies have been carried out to test the efficacy of prayer in aiding the recovery of patients in hospital. Most of these have achieved a modest degree of statistical significance. Much more impressive, however, are the results obtained by scientists at the Maharishi International University’s Institute of Science, Technology and Public Policy. Based on his theory of the unified field, the Maharishi advanced the hypothesis that meditation itself, and especially the transcendental meditation he was teaching, has its effect in the real world, and that this effect might

be greatly magnified when large numbers meditate together. This hypothesis has been tested now in over 40 studies on a variety of social indicators, with violent crime showing the biggest effect. Many of these have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

A very large and well-planned experiment took place in Washington in 1993. Every stage of the experiment was overseen by a 27-member review board including sociologists, criminologists, and representatives from the Police and Local Government. It was decided, as the dependent variable, to monitor figures for violent crime. Over a period of two months, TM practitioners gathered at several locations in the city, and practised the TM-Sidhi programme together twice daily at pre-arranged times. The graphic result presented on their website², shows that, as the number of meditators rose to reach eventually about 4,000, the violent crime figure dropped progressively by 23% (Fig. 2). The statistical significance of this correlation was astronomical. No significant decreases in crime were found for similar periods during the previous five years. On consideration of a great number of other possible causes for this result, such as unusual weather conditions, etc., none was found to be remotely answerable.

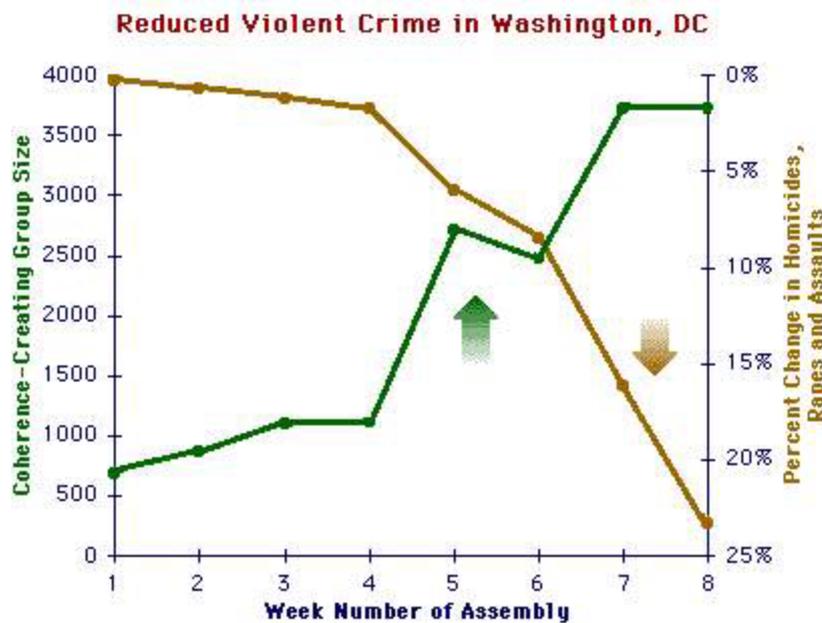


Fig. 2

Another study centred on the war in Lebanon in 1988. Over a two-year period, seven TM groups met at various times totalling 93 days - not only in Lebanon and Israel, but further afield in Holland, Yugoslavia and the US. Their influence, assessed by a composite peace/war index, during these 93 days reached enormous significance by comparison with the intervening periods, totalling 748 days, when no such groups were meeting. The authors comment that these results make this peace-creating effect of group meditations the most rigorously established phenomenon in the history of social science. Both studies have been published in great detail in mainstream journals.

These results must be taken seriously. To see the graphs gives us exactly the kind of visual, quantitative evidence that our scientifically-encultured minds now demand. Some would object that people have been praying for peace from the beginning, and look how much war we still have. But petitionary prayer still has an element of ego, in that it is asking for something “I” want. The trick may be to stand aside and allow the greater universe to take whatever form it will; to allow the Tao to flow freely. Thus the TM meditators in the experiments were not consciously praying for anything, but rather could be said to be merely aligning themselves with the universe. At the same time, they could hardly escape knowing that an experiment was under way, and what was being measured; and those in the Washington experiment would have known that they were in Washington. This kind of link, held in the background of the mind, is what is usually employed for distant healing, and can focus an essentially non-local effect onto a specific target.

Since we know with such certainty now that we are all connected at this subtle level, we must allow for the possibility that we are having an influence all the time; not only during set times for spiritual practise. It may be that we are never “off duty,” but are on the stage all the time This influence would come not from any kind of activity, not by any doing, but by the quality of our being.

Philip Pullman has given us a potent myth for our times in the trilogy: “His Dark Materials”. Both a dramatic and entertaining fairy story, and a deeply meaningful allegory, this work engages with the present turning point in the collective psyche by having woven into it, in an unobtrusive way, a number of concepts derived from modern physics. As the story develops, one is gradually made aware of the mysterious “dust”. One is led to understand that dust is of over-riding significance for the very survival of the human race, but that it is leaking away. The protagonists, two children on the verge of adolescence, find themselves engaged on a quest to stop the haemorrhage of dust, and so save the world. What is dust? Although never baldly stated, it can be understood as one of the fundamental particles. Just as physics tells us of particles of light (photons) and of charge (electrons), so dust would consist of particles of love. With the encouragement both of scientific theory, and the astounding results just quoted, perhaps we may gain inspiration to set out on our own mythic quest to restore love to the world, and bring the age of Kali Yuga to an end.

<http://noosphere.princeton.edu/>

2. <http://permanentpeace.org/>